DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 021 SO 020 890

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE Social Studies Curriculum Reform Reports. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-90-3
PUB DATE Apr 90
CONTRACT RI88062009
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM Publications Manager, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Curriculum Problems; *Educational Change; Educational Resources; *Elementary School Curriculum; Elementary Secondary Education; Geography; History; *Secondary School Curriculum; *Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS 1980s; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The 1980s were years of concern about the curricula in elementary and secondary schools. Throughout the decade educators in the social studies, as well as in other fields of knowledge, formed curriculum study groups to assess the status quo and to recommend improvements in widely distributed reports. This ERIC Digest examines: (1) four social studies curriculum reform reports of 1989; (2) the treatment of geography and history in these reports; (3) challenges to the expanding environments curriculum; and (4) implementation of recommendations for curriculum reform. (Author)

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by

John J. Patrick

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ERIC Digest EDO-SO-90-3 April 1990

Social Studies Curriculum Reform Reports

by John J. Patrick

The 1980s were years of concern about the curricula in elementary and secondary schools. Throughout this decade educators in the social studies, as well as in other fields of knowledge, formed curriculum study groups to assess the status quo and recommend improvements in widely distributed reports. This ERIC Digest examines (1) four social studies curriculum reform reports of 1989, (2) the treatment of geography and history in these reports, (3) challenges to the expanding environments curriculum, and (4) implementation of recommendations for curriculum reform.

Curriculum Reform Reports of 1989. Four curriculum reform reports of 1989, like most of their predecessors during the 1980s, strongly urge the establishment of core requirements in social studies, knowledge and skills all students are expected to learn. The reports are listed below:

- The report of the Curriculum Task Force of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools, CHARTING A COURSE: SOCIAL STUDIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.
- The Bradley Commission's HISTORICAL LITERACY: THE CASE FOR HISTORY IN AMERICAN EDUCATION, an in-depth sequel to the brief report of 1988, BUILDING A HISTORY CURRICULUM: GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING HISTORY IN SCHOOLS.
- The Education for Democracy Project's DEMOCRACY'S HALF-TOLD STORY: WHAT AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS SHOULD ADD, the companion to DEMOCRACY'S UNTOLD STORY: WHAT WORLD HISTORY TEXTBOOKS NEGLECT (1987).
- The National Governors' Association report, AMERICA IN TRANSITION: THE INTERNATIONAL FRONTIER, a call for emphasis on international studies in the curricula of elementary and secondary schools.

The curriculum reform reports of 1989 reflect major trends and issues in the social studies literature of the 1980s. For example, these reports, in line with their predecessors in the 1980s, tend to emphasize history and geography as central subjects in the core curriculum of the elementary and secondary school (History-Social Science Curriculum Framework and Criteria Committee 1988). They also tend to stress an international perspective in the teaching of geography, history, and current events (Task Force on International Education 1989). Further, these 1989 reports emphasize consistent, cumulative, and detailed studies of key topics and themes from kindergarten through grade twelve. And the reports of the Bradley Commission and the National Commission on Social Studies follow the 1988 California Framework in strong calls for either substantial modification or replacement of the traditional expanding environments curriculum scheme of the elementary schools.

History and Geography at the Center of the Curriculum. The 1989 reports continue a decade-long trend in decrying the general ignorance of American students in geography and history, the shoddy treatments of these subjects in standard textbooks, and the superficial or insufficient coverage of these key subjects in curricula and classrooms (Grosvenor 1989; Jackson 1989; Ravitch 1989). Writing for the Bradley Commission, Kenneth Jackson reports, "History is typically a forgotten subject in the elementary schools, where an 'expanding environments' approach assumes that preadolescents cannot understand historical concepts." He reveals that 15 percent of the nation's high school students do not take a course in United States history, and about half of them do not study any European or world history courses (1989, 11).

In response to undesirable curriculum conditions and learning outcomes, the Bradley Commission and the Education for Democracy Project stress the primacy of history and recommend the blending of geographic content with the study of United States and world history. The Education for Democracy Project, for example, calls for required high school courses in the history of the United States, in Western civilization, and in one non-Western civilization. Courses in world geography and United States government also are proposed as part of the secondary school core curriculum (Gagnon 1989, 170). The Bradley Commission calls for four years of history during the six-year sequence in social studies from Grades 7-12 (1988, 7).

The Curriculum Task Force of the National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools concurs that history and geography "should provide the matrix or framework for social studies" (1989, 3). However, the Commission also stresses that concepts from various social sciences—economics, sociology, and political science, for example—should be integrated with history and geography throughout the curriculum. The proposed high school core curriculum is a three-year sequence in world history that incorporates the study of American history. These historical studies would be interrelated with ideas and perspectives from geography. The fourth and final year of high school would involve a course in U.S. government and civics and an elective course in one other social science.

Some social studies educators oppose the calls to stress history and geography. Educators in economics, for example, argue for the fundamental value of their discipline and the need to overcome widespread ignorance of concepts and facts in economics (Walstad and Soper 1988). Advocates of current events and social issues as the essential elements of social studies education also disagree with the proposals for a history-dominated curriculum (Evans 1989).

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Critical Challenge to the Expanding Environments Scheme. The elementary school social studies curriculum seems most ripe for changes in line with the 1980s curriculum reform movement. The California Department of Education became a leader in this area of curriculum reform with publication in 1988 of a history/geography-centered curriculum framework as an alternative to the traditional elementary social studies curriculum. This California curriculum is included in the Bradley Commission report as one of three alternative curriculum patterns it recommends to elementary school educators. Charlotte Crabtree, a member of the Bradley Commission and an author of the 1988 California curriculum design, points out that there is no foundation in research on child development and learning for the tenets of the expanding environments framework (1989, 175-183).

The National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools also rejects the traditional expanding environments scheme in favor of more profound and complex studies of peoples and places around the world in the past and present. Students would be introduced to a rich variety of literature, history, geography, and the arts from various cultures and historical periods from the primary through the intermediate grades. This represents a clear departure from past practices of deferring serious study of events in history or of faraway places until the higher grades.

Implementation of Recommendations for Curriculum Reform. During the 1980s, there was a general increase in the number of social studies courses required for graduation. From 1980 to the beginning of 1989, high school graduation requirements in social studies were increased in thirty-two of the fifty states. In twenty-five states, the requirement for graduation is three years; it is three and one-half years in two states; and it is four years in three states. Twenty states, however, still do not require even three years of social studies in the high school core curriculum (Clune 1989, 49-61). The number of students taking history within the social studies curriculum also increased during the 1980s. Between 1982 and 1987, the proportion of students completing at least one course in U.S. history increased from 76 to 87 percent. The number of students taking a world history course increased from 33 to 44 percent (O'Neill 1989, 1).

The advances in the quantity of social studies courses required for graduation from high school offer hope to advocates of more substantial changes. These quantitative changes, however, fall far short of the reforms insisted upon by the leading curriculum reform reports. Further, they reveal nothing about the quality of the curriculum. Nonetheless, they may lend credibility to the optimistic view of Kenneth Jackson, chair of the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, who predicts that "the political and psychological climate in the final decade of the twentieth century may be more receptive to curricular reform than at any time in the past eight decades" (1989, 9).

Will this positive climate for curriculum reform materialize as Jackson predicts? If so, will it produce the kind of changes that he and other leaders of the 1980s have recommended? These questions will engage social studies educators as we move from the lofty ideals of curriculum reform proposals of the 1980s to the hard realities of practical curriculum change in the 1990s.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.